

Delver Magic

Book VIII

Spirit Past

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Important Note

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Spirit Past is the eighth book in the *Delver Magic* series. While it is a complete novel, it is recommended that the series be read in order.

Information about *Delver Magic* can be obtained from the author's web page at <http://www.sitelane.com>.

Thank you.

To Joan, for being my past, my present, and especially my future!

Prologue

The dieruhne snarled as it gazed across the outer regions of Demonspawn. It would have to cross harsh and hostile territories to reach its objective, but the barren terrain and its vicious inhabitants failed to spark any fear in the crimson-skinned beast. The demon inhaled the heavy spiteful air with calm recognition, and it viewed the skulking horrors in the exterior lands as nothing more than minor annoyances. Demonspawn was home to the dieruhne, but it knew its return would not go unnoticed... or unpunished.

A malicious presence at the heart of the realm would ultimately end the demon's existence. The dieruhne wondered how far it would be allowed to progress before it was plucked from the ground like some fallen, overripe fruit and pulled into the center of the realm to face complete devastation. It knew its fate was inevitable, but it believed it would still be allowed to speak its warning, a warning that was crucial for its masters to hear.

As it began its march, the hardy figure blended into the cruel environment. Its thick hide and the tall rugged frame captured the essence of brutality. The beast appeared as if it was raised to walk through steaming volcanoes, and its durability became essential as the elements began to rise against it. The dieruhne had been bred in Demonspawn, and though the realm consisted more of desolate rock and empty gray skies than burning lava and heavy black smoke, the demon's inherent strength and resilience allowed it to thrive in the violence and hate that surged across the dismal plane.

Stalking deeper into the realm, the beast eventually came across many of the domain's native inhabitants. Initially, it met with minor demons that hissed and growled. They could sense the dieruhne's presence would no longer be tolerated in Demonspawn, and though they dared not attack the hulking creature, they displayed blatant displeasure with its return.

Though the dieruhne could dispatch the lesser creatures with ease, it could not blame them for their reaction. If it had sensed a similar aura in any of them, it would have torn them to shreds. Once a full demon ventured out of the realm of its origin— even if it had not been by choice—it could not return without facing annihilation; such was the cost of leaving Demonspawn,

Steadily marching over dry ground that appeared like smoke-stained sand, the dieruhne proceeded deeper into the realm. As it crossed into territories inhabited by more aggressive creatures, its progress slowed. It found itself fighting through bands of smaller demons. The enraged monsters found the dieruhne's presence insulting. The lesser creatures were no match for the strength of the returning demon, but the beast worried such conflict would only bring greater attention to itself before it fulfilled its purpose.

Casting the minor demons aside, it broke into the inner regions of Demonspawn, not quite the center, but close enough to engage with other dieruhnes. A large beast set upon the deserter almost immediately.

"You were unwise to return. The stench of other realms sticks to you. You will be devoured."

"I understand," the returning fiend replied without emotion.

"You willingly submit to retribution? You will not fight?"

"No, I will not contest my fate, but I come with a warning. Take me to the primevals. It is to them I submit."

The large demon cursed, but it could do nothing more.

The primevals staked out their claims when Demonspawn was in its infancy. They did not rule outright, for there was only one absolute sovereign in the realm of demons, but they demanded tribute. If a demon submitted itself to the judgment and wrath of a primeval—a foolish decision, for the primevals lacked any trace of compassion or integrity—then the compliant demon's fate became locked to the cravings of its masters.

The returning dieruhne was brought to the center of a hollow crater surrounded by large gray boulders that cast shadows of gloom over the cavity. The realm itself lacked all warmth, even within the dingy radiance that cascaded over the domain. The burning desires of base emotions served as the only illumination across the region, and that light held nothing but despair.

Two of the primevals hung in the shadows. Like the deserter before them, both were once dieruhnes, but they no longer carried the same shape or traits. Their existence could not be measured by any passage of time. They were beyond ancient, and they had evolved into something greater, and worse, than the origin of their forms.

They looked upon the renegade with growing hunger, but they could not discount the obvious discrepancy in its existence. They cared little about the defector's warning. They desired to consume the traitor, but in a realm of deceit and treachery, a single misstep, even for a primeval, would lead to destruction.

"The line of your history is broken," one muttered.

"Interrupted," the second agreed.

"My actions were not my own," the dieruhne admitted. "The break you see in my past is why I am here. My mind was ensnared and I left Demonspawn by another's choosing, not my own."

The ancient demons scoffed at the assertion.

"Do you think this will save you?"

"The cause of your departure is irrelevant," the second primeval added. "To return means your destruction."

"My destruction is also immaterial. The independence of dieruhne existence is of greater concern. Demons do not bend to the will of base creatures, but I and three other dieruhnes were coerced by serps."

"Impossible!" snapped one of the primevals.

"In this realm, the past is as obvious as the present to those who have the eyes to see," the dieruhne stated. "The interruption within my history is already obvious to you. How could such a break exist unless control was usurped by another... in my case by a collection of serps?"

The two primevals quietly contemplated the claim. They could not dispute the fracture in the dieruhne's history. Something had allowed for the demon to absolve itself from its own actions over a brief period of time. They would not, however, accept such an incredible claim on the testimony of a renegade. They lacked the authority, and if they overstepped their boundaries, they would suffer beyond measure.

"You must stand before Reiculf," one of the primevals declared.

"The daokiln will determine the proper response," the second agreed.

"Understood," the dieruhne replied, even as it realized the weight of such a pronouncement meant its obliteration, "but you must agree that I have fulfilled my commitment to the past. You, the primevals who oversee the dieruhnes, have been warned of external influences. The memories of my actions are now beyond your condemnation."

The dieruhne could say no more. Two winged demons dropped from the dark gray sky and sharp talons dug into the thick skin of the renegade's arms. They carried the creature deeper into the center of Demonspawn, to the sanctuary of the realm's ultimate ruler. The dieruhne was dropped brusquely to the dark, powdery ground as the flying demons sped off into the bleak shadows overhead.

The dieruhne would not meet the gaze of its ultimate master. It stood submissively before the daokiln, allowing the massive demon lord to inspect its presence without disturbance.

"I have heard your claim," Reiculf growled. "Your past is clear to me, but certain aspects are hidden in dark magic. Serps do not possess such ability. How is it possible they gained control over you? Speak!"

"I am uncertain of their techniques. Several serps formed a council and combined their strength. That is all I know."

"The explanation is insufficient!" the daokiln roared with fury. "You will tell..."

Reiculf ceased his outburst as he looked to the edges of Demonspawn. He sensed more than just invaders to his realm, he tasted opportunity.

"I no longer have need of your explanations," the daokiln snarled. "I will ask the serps myself, for they are here."

Though the crimson-skinned demon would not have to face further questioning, it could not escape its fate. Reiculf opened his massive jaws and fell upon the dieruhne, swallowing it whole.

Chapter 1

"You will tell me everything I want to know, won't you?"

Of course she would, and the serp would not lie, either. Macheve would willingly reveal her deepest secrets. She would condemn herself with every last morsel of truth, no matter how small. She would speak of dark, twisted thoughts that barely entered her mind, thoughts that even a serp might consider unbecoming. She would tell the daokiln, the demon tyrant, anything he wanted to know and more.

She knew what had happened to Desiv and the other serps on the council. Their pain was immeasurable, and their pleas for mercy went unanswered. Her only chance to avoid a similar fate was to cooperate with every fiber of her existence and hope that it would be enough to earn her a comparatively quick and relatively painless death. Her prospects, however, remained bleak. Hope died quickly in that horrid place, torn away with feverish wrath.

The council of serps had been captured immediately after Enin had expunged them from Portsans and delivered them to Demonspawn. They never had a chance to escape the breeding grounds of pure demons, never made more than a few steps toward the much less formidable regions of the dark realm. They were plucked from the ground by frightening winged beasts and brought to the very depths of the most loathsome region within a nightmare existence.

They couldn't run from their collective fate, couldn't hide from the demon ruler who was aware of their misguided exploits. They had previously chosen to take control of four dieruhnes, pure demons, and their past connection to the fiends rang out across Demonspawn like bells chiming on an otherwise peaceful evening during the dormant season.

There had been five serps, and each was thrown into a chamber of confinement matching his or her greatest fears. There they had waited for what seemed an eternity. They wept and screamed, pleaded for an end to their torment, but when their voices found the attention of the unholy beast, they wished they had remained silent and accepted their captivity as blissful sanctuary.

One by one they had been wrenched from their cells and brought before the daokiln. They were not questioned. They were not offered any hope for salvation. They faced absolute annihilation. The demon tyrant shredded their existence as if their souls had been slowly grated on dull blades and then set on fire. Death came only after there was no more possible pain left for them to feel.

Macheve was the last of the five, and she had been forced to watch from a dark pit. The stinking hole was completely covered in shadow. Steep walls smeared with blood and torn flesh utterly destroyed any thought of escape. A thick, oily ooze ran down those same walls and carried half dead insects into the bottom of the hollow. The disgusting slime covered Macheve to her waist. To her horror, her circumstances were almost pleasing compared to the ghastly end which she knew awaited her.

Evil sprites projected the fates of her fellow council members into her mind, forced her to concentrate on the horrific suffering of each serp. She could not block out the images, could not bar the grievous scenes from her consciousness.

In a way, she actually experienced their pain. She shared in their agony, and she understood that the torment grew with each death. She knew hers would be the worst, and when she was finally ripped from the sludge of her pit, she looked about frantically for some sharp object she could stab into her own dark heart or through her eye and deep into her brain.

To her dismay, the ground was barren of everything but a fine, dark gray dust. Not a single rock, dull or sharp, was within her grasp. She dropped to her knees before the massive demon but could not even whimper for pity. Her mind was locked with fear, and she trembled convulsively.

The demon tyrant leaned slightly forward, purposely casting his heavy shadow over the pawn he intended to use. He was far taller and more massive than a cliff behemoth, but his face lacked the peaceful serenity obtained from the word of Godson. There was a mix of anger and hate in his expression, but also twisted purpose. He would have his way.

"You did not answer me," the daokiln noted, and then repeated himself with even greater emphasis. "You *will* tell me everything I want to know, *won't you?!?*"

"Yes... whatever you want," Macheve managed.

"I want many things and I believe you are the key to those desires. But keys are tools, nothing more. Do you understand?"

"Yes... I do."

"No, you do not. Look at me!"

Macheve took her gaze from the ashy ground and placed it upon the center of the daokiln. He was both majestic and gruesome, and Macheve understood immediately how the beast could rule Demonspawn unopposed. From the broad, taunted face, across the thick, bare chest and down the powerful, unyielding legs, the demon possessed the aura of an inconceivable strength fueled by incessant hate. The pale gray skin appeared to vibrate with tension, and the demonic white eyes were empty of compassion.

The demon wished to remove all doubt from the insignificant creature before it, desired to write his ownership across Macheve's soul.

"You are serp," the daokiln hissed, "and you understand both manipulation and control. You have the power to search thoughts, but unless I allow it, my mind is impenetrable to you. For this one moment, I will allow it. Search my mind."

The statement was issued as a bellowing command of authority, and Macheve did not hesitate in following the order. She did not wish to reach into the mind of such a wicked beast, but to refuse would invite far worse punishment. With great trepidation but without recourse, she linked her mind to the vile thoughts of the demon tyrant.

In but a single instant, a wave of a thousand nightmares rushed through her consciousness. She witnessed horrors beyond her imagination; cruel and vicious images shred her previous understanding of reality.

Macheve was serp... she came from the dark realm. Her own desires were shaped from twisted selfishness, but even her worst and most base thoughts could not begin to compare to the ghastly scenes that assaulted her senses.

She saw chaos on an unimaginable scale. She smelled decaying flesh, smoldering rock, and diseased crops. She felt boiling heat on her scaly skin even as a wave of blistering cold cut her to the bone. Her insides burned and then froze, seemingly hundreds

of times over and over in a single heartbeat. She heard screams from every corner of existence, soul-wrenching shrieks that pierced her body like a hundred sharp knives.

The overwhelming agony in every dark fragment gripped Macheve's body, and she could not break its hold. Nausea swept through her entire being and she emptied the contents of her stomach, her last meal, upon the charcoal dust before her.

The steaming vomit was instantly attacked by the very ground itself. The dark particles swallowed the partially digested glob with a display of viciousness that only served to expand the serp's sickness.

Insanity would have taken hold of her, but the daokiln would not allow it. The demon lord grabbed her awareness with a brutality of his own, wrenched it from the depths of madness, and forced the serp to face her fate with absolute clarity of mind.

The ruler of Demonspawn decided to test the serp.

"Speak my name," the daokiln demanded.

"Reiculf," Macheve replied with a wheezing hack, as if stating the name forced her to sink deeper into the horrors she had perceived.

"And what am I?"

"You are the master of Demonspawn."

"A master has many tools, but by themselves, tools are useless. They only maintain purpose through my hands. That one lesson must be made clear to you. You have nothing with which to bargain, no significance on your own. You are worthless unless I deem otherwise. What you have from this moment forward comes from my willingness to use you. The moment I discard you, you are nothing. That is what you now understand."

Macheve did not even nod, but her acceptance of that fact was beyond question. She remained who she was, she remained the serp Macheve, but her resolve was gone. The momentary link to Reiculf washed away her autonomy. She was not of demon blood, but she was within the grip of their master.

Reiculf could have torn the answers he desired from Macheve's mind, but he found it more entertaining, more amusing, to question the serp, to trifle with the lesser being's minimal awareness. It was a momentary distraction for the fiend, nothing more.

"You were one of several serps. You formed a council and pooled your manipulative powers. In doing so, you gained influence over pure demons, an impressive task, but one that has earned you your fate. Explain how you managed this!"

Macheve answered robotically.

"We linked ourselves with magic. The connection allowed us to overcome our own deviousness. As individuals, we could not betray the council."

"You used magic to alter your character... to suppress your natural inclination toward deceit?"

"No, we allowed the magical link to bring our deceitful nature to the surface. Our thoughts and plans became intertwined."

"Interesting, but how were you able to combine your manipulative talents?"

"Through the same link."

The demon master's blazing pale eyes probed deeper into the serp, and Reiculf's patience for the game dwindled.

"I know you cannot lie to me, but your answer is deficient. Magical connections are limited. I have such a link with you now. I can command you, but I cannot pass my

influence through you. Otherwise, I would have the window I crave to cast my will upon every realm through which you could pass."

Macheve no longer felt overwhelming fear in responding to the demon tyrant. The monster still terrified her, but a growing yearning overcame the dread. While she could still experience pain, and the anguish that went with it, she had become a slave to the master, and as such, she answered with a willingness to please Reiculf.

"It was not a connection born of a magical spell. We each took a slice of pure magic from the core of a single spell caster. We absorbed that magic and became linked. Even as the magic existed in separate entities, it remained bound to its original source. Through the spell caster, the members of the council shared both thoughts and ambitions, but we could also combine our abilities."

Magic was not foreign to the daokiln, but the concept of binding individuals through core slices as opposed to the workings of a spell was unique and surprising.

"A slice of pure magic? Serps joined by congruent magic taken from another's core? Who thought of this?"

"A spell caster named Ansas. He developed the means."

"And where is this Ansas now?"

"He was defeated and taken by the slink ghoul, Baannat."

The tyrant was also well aware of Baannat. Reiculf did not view the ghoul as a threat, but more of an anomaly. The daokiln admitted as much as the entire incident appeared to take on even greater significance.

"I have studied Baannat," the monster admitted. "He is no longer simply a slink ghoul. He has transformed into a being of dual states. He is trapped in a new realm of nonexistence where his influence is restricted. Still, he manages to reach out into physical realms with limited power. His ability was aided by the transformation of his being. Even though I wish to reach into the physical worlds, I am not willing to alter what I am."

Reiculf considered the facets of Macheve's explanation as he peered into the very history of the serp's existence. He knew the loathsome creature could not lie in his presence, but certain inconsistencies remained in her account.

"There is no connection between your council of serps and Baannat," the monster hissed. "And as for the sorcerer, your council formed after Ansas was defeated and taken hostage. With Ansas trapped in Baannat's realm, how did you obtain the knowledge necessary to take magical slices from a spell caster's core?"

"Ansas left detailed notes on many discoveries. We also used a spell caster that had once received a slice of Ansas' own magical core. His name is Neltus. That made the process easier since Neltus was already versed in the process. Based on what we learned from the notes and the spell caster's previous experience, we managed to determine the correct procedure. Every member of the council received a slice of core magic. We were tied together in many ways, ways that allowed us to combine our magical abilities. We were even able to keep track of Enin, the wizard from Connel, through an indirect link."

"Indirect?" the daokiln hissed.

"We did not receive any portion of Enin's magic, but we maneuvered Enin into a difficult position. We forced him to give a portion of his energy to Neltus. It allowed us to keep the wizard in check, at least for a while."

Even in Demonspawn, Reiculf was aware of Enin. The wizard who could cast pure white magic in two perfect circles was one of the most powerful spell casters to shape the

history of Uton. Enin, however, meant nothing to the daokiln. Reiculf's energy encompassed an entire dimension of hate and agony, and every wicked flame pulsed through his essence. His magic was beyond that of mortals, but it had always remained trapped in Demonspawn.

The daokiln considered the past events of Uton. Twisted histories flourished in Demonspawn, and the master of the domain picked through each shred. As he began to tie specific pieces together, he took hold of the opportunity at hand.

"Were there other spell casters that received magical slices from this sorcerer... from Ansas?"

"Three others. A woman named Rivira. She is no more. An elf named Scheff Rutlan, and an infern named Gnafil."

"And these notes of Ansas, where are they?"

"Still in a study he created in the dark realm. We studied them carefully, but decided to leave them in their place of origin. It seemed the safest way to proceed. The insight was ingenious, but the concepts were focused entirely on the pure ebony magic that formed Ansas' magical core. Other than utilizing the slices of pure magic, the rest of the notes were useless."

"Useless to those without the proper understanding. I will see these notes... and you will do what is necessary to make that happen."

"Whatever you wish."

Chapter 2

Gnafil spent most of his time in Uton perfecting his spells in the rocky hills surrounding the Lacobian Desert. He had lost the slice of pure ebony magic Ansas once placed in his core, but he remained loyal to the purity of his burnt orange hue. He continued to cast spells based only in fire, but without the amplification of Ansas' black energy, his incantations were but a fraction of their previous intensity.

Despite the reduction in strength, the infern's most powerful spells could still light up the desert sky with unbelievable brilliance. He enjoyed filling the darkness of night with one firestorm after another, and the hard stone and gritty sand of the surrounding lands allowed for several castings without creating a steady burn along the ground. It was not out of a benevolent wish for safety which called for his caution, but rather a desire to remain in seclusion.

After leaving Ansas' side, Gnafil lived in isolation, a setting he preferred. While he found both purpose and distraction in mastering his craft, the half-demon understood its potential hazards. Fire was perhaps the most unpredictable of the elements, and he had no desire to create a disaster which might bring one of Uton's guardians to the grounds of his experimentation.

He could deal with overprotective algors and even a small force of elf guards, but a battle group of dwarves resistant to magic could cause him more trouble than he cared to face. And if his actions caught the attention of the powerful wizard from Connel, he would have a great deal more to worry about than a dwarf axe or mace.

No, he did not wish to face Enin, and so, it was better to stay near the rocks and away from the forest, even though he would enjoy seeing the trees burn. It was not much of a sacrifice, for he could travel great distances with ease. Spells of teleportation, as well as a vast number of portals, allowed him to move around both Uton and various realms for his other needs.

As a half-demon, the non-demonic portion of Gnafil's essence allowed him to cross into other existences as simply as if he stepped across the barren plains of the dark realm. Inferns served as the foot soldiers for their more powerful demon masters, but they also found a level of independence when engaged in lands of a more orderly nature.

Still, Gnafil retained certain characteristics and capabilities intrinsic to most demons, and as such, he remained linked to Demonspawn. Despite his ability to move freely from one realm to another, he could not mask his presence entirely from Reiculf. With his position easily obtainable to the master of all demons, he was forced to receive an unwelcome visitor.

The serp stepped out from behind a large collection of boulders. In previous times, Macheve might have avoided the half-demon, would have at least offered the infern proper respect, but that was before she had stood in the presence of total demonic fury. Despite Gnafil's magical aptitude, Macheve found Gnafil's powers almost laughable, and she was no longer simply a serp. She was the herald for Reiculf, and she understood without doubt that Gnafil would submit to the will of the demon tyrant.

"Gnafil, your service is required," Macheve announced.

The infern barely glanced toward the serp. Initially, he gave little regard to Macheve and began to speak before comprehending the full weight of the misfortune that had just crashed upon his doorstep.

"Be gone, serp. Your manipulations are useless on..."

Gnafil stopped in mid-sentence. The demon portion of his spirit allowed him to see beyond the boundaries of Macheve's physical presence. He could not ignore the fiery essence burning within the serp.

"You serve Reiculf!" the spell caster muttered in near disbelief.

"As do you," Macheve countered. "He has orders for you."

Gnafil became submissive. He was no longer addressing an irrelevant dark creature. As difficult as it was for the half-demon to conceive, he spoke to Macheve as if Reiculf himself stood directly behind the serp. The infern might have held sway over fire, but the demon tyrant was beyond the elemental forces. All the fire of the sun could not match the force of evil within the daokiln. Gnafil replied with simple acceptance.

"What must I do?"

"You know of the quarters created by Ansas, the meeting place he established when you served the sorcerer... when you shared in his magic?"

"Yes."

"Take us there now."

The half-demon accepted the order. Gnafil knew the command came from Reiculf. He could not decline, and he did not hesitate.

The infern drew upon the basic tenets of fire, the traits that remained essential despite the realm of existence. Fire burned, and as such, it could burn a hole in two realms at once. To create a portal between two existences, Gnafil cast a spell that would scorch through the interconnected layers and create a hole for transport. The portal was erected before the serp, and they both stepped through, out of Uton and into the purely physical region of the dark realm where creatures of mayhem preyed upon each other.

Gnafil led Macheve across the barren and near lifeless grounds. He did so with a quick step and without regard to any dangers lurking in the region. He knew they would not be disturbed. They were both in the service of Reiculf, and just as Macheve's essence smoldered with a deep evil, that same malevolence began to spread across the infern's twisted soul as well.

Macheve fell in behind the half-demon as she also knew they would not be molested in a realm of monsters and fiends. Goblins ran from them. Shags and river rogues took refuge in the hollows behind rocks or at the banks of blood stained rivers. Razor crows and hook hawks soared away over high cliffs. They could sense the presence of the greatest of all evils. Even though the daokiln was bound to Demonspawn and could not physically reach beyond its borders, Reiculf's wickedness raged across the dark realm and no beast would dare oppose his will.

It had been some time since the serp had walked the grounds of her homeland. It was far brighter than she remembered. She looked to the skies, and instead of witnessing the bland gray sameness that once ruled over the entire realm, she saw twinkling dots of light across the heavens.

Stars.

Such beacons had once been totally removed from the dark regions. The land had been covered by a canopy of gray shadow. The empty sameness, however, was no more.

It seemed that more than one realm had changed since the magic was set free from Ingar's sphere.

Macheve knew that Ryson Acumen once battled the sorcerer Ansas in the upper regions of the dark realm. The delver had not only won that battle, his actions brought a hint of light into a land of despair.

Macheve shrugged. The thought of the delver did little to relieve her own suffering, did not bring any hope to *her* future. If anything, considerations of Ryson Acumen stirred a desire for vengeance. It wasn't just the wizard of Connel responsible for her devastation, it was every individual who defeated the serp council, and that included the delver. Not wishing to dwell upon the reasons for her maligned state, she dismissed the stars as irrelevant and continued following the infern with a simple determination to carry out her master's will.

They came upon the abandoned house without incident and found the odd little building intact and untouched. Ansas might have been taken by Baannat into a realm of nonexistence, but the small structure still radiated with the sorcerer's power. The dark creatures of that region dared not venture too near, for the ebony magic that constructed Ansas' modest sanctuary continued to vibrate a warning to intruders.

Gnafil led Macheve through the front door, down a hallway and into the unassuming study. There was a simple desk and chair in the center of the room, but it was the shelves which covered the walls that gained Macheve's attention. Ansas' notes remained undisturbed, piled along every available surface.

The serp plucked a stack of papers and quickly perused the contents. She felt a great wave of relief as she knew she would meet her master's expectations.

"We are to gather all of these notes and bring them to Reiculf."

For the first time, Gnafil faltered.

"I can not return to Demonspawn! Even as a half-demon, I am barred from entering. The breeding grounds have always been separated, always kept beyond the veil. To pass through the barren edges of the dark realm and into Demonspawn would mean the end of my existence."

"Do not be so dramatic," the serp admonished the infern. "Reiculf demands your presence. You will be spared."

Despite the reassurance, Gnafil remained frozen. Demons were bred in Demonspawn and they could stay indefinitely, but once they ventured out into pure physical existence, even into such places as the dark realm, they could not return. Full demons were more restricted in their ability to move from one dimension to another, but even half-demons were forever barred from returning to the inner reaches of Reiculf's sanctuary.

Macheve could not help but notice the infern's reluctance to move.

"Would you rather reject the wishes of Reiculf?" the serp inquired.

"Couldn't you take the notes to the master?"

"Are you trying to make a deal with me... or Reiculf?"

Answering the question was like hoping to catch a massive boulder dropped from a high cliff. It was beyond foolish to bargain with the daokiln.

"I do not wish to make a deal with anyone."

"Then you best decide whether you will accept Reiculf's instructions or refuse them."

There was no choice to be made and Gnafil began gathering up many of the notes.

"Very good," Macheve complimented, and when they had collected all of the parchments from the shelves, she led the infern back outside.

She, just as the other dark creatures, could sense the strong pulse of Ansas' magic within the very walls of the structure. She knew it served as a warning to keep mischievous goblins and other more dangerous beasts clear of Ansas' study. She didn't want the energy to interfere with her next request.

"Teleport us to the inner regions of Demonspawn. Reiculf will summon us when he is ready."

Teleporting was not quite an accurate term. Reaching Demonspawn within the dark realm was similar to swimming through a stream of thick muck only to dive into an ocean of sewage. The demon breeding grounds existed within its own separate layer. It was a part of the dark lands, but it was not bound by conceptual space. Its borders were more like invisible curtains that always lingered far in the distance. They could not be seen or touched, but they were there nonetheless.

To pass into Demonspawn required a deliberate decision to open a passage, to break a seal and venture forward by the will of spirit as opposed to physical motion. One did not simply walk across shadowed grounds to gain entrance into Demonspawn, but rather dove spiritually downward into the abyss.

The breeding grounds themselves were also layered. The center was, of course, dominated by Reiculf, but each surrounding ring represented a step further away or closer to total damnation. Demons moved back and forth from the outer edges to the more internal regions as if tempting annihilation or searching for temporary refuge.

Pure demons could not leave completely without breaking a covenant which allowed for their creation, but they could move through dimensional gaps that tied various planes together in universal existence. As long as they never completely broke the barrier between existences, they could peer into almost any realm. They could dance at the edges of other worlds, wait near the borders to capture unwitting souls without direction, and hope to appease their master by spreading the iniquity which was the very essence of Demonspawn.

To enter the region, Gnafil crafted a spell that mimicked teleportation, but it was more of a spiritual alternative. He used his magic to reach into both his and Macheve's consciousness, to validate their willingness to venture down a dark and twisted path. With their desire to journey into the void confirmed, the infern reached into the very shadows of the dark realm and opened a rift that enveloped them.

There was pain upon entry, and both Macheve and Gnafil shrieked as they broke through the veil that separated the dark realm from Reiculf's domain. They stepped through gray shadows into the interior of Demonspawn. They stood well beyond the outer regions, but not too close to the nightmare's heart to challenge the daokiln's dominance.

Even for two loathsome creatures such as a serp and an infern, the surrounding lands contained unspeakable horrors. As they looked across the dreadful landscape, misery became their companion. The air was thick, the stench sickening. Demons of every shape and size struggled to move over harsh ground or against violent winds. The heavens were gray and lifeless. While the light of distant stars broke through the skies of the dark realm, they could not shine within the utterly hopeless pit of Demonspawn. The infern

and serp would never get used to their surroundings, but they accepted their plight and waited in gloomy silence.

There was no way to gauge the passage of time and so they had no idea how long they stood within the bounds of sheer misery. They could do nothing but try to avert their eyes from the more disturbing scenes in the distance. Eventually, they felt a great pull and their bodies stormed forward, yanked to the center of torment by the will of Reiculf.

The daokiln barely acknowledged their presence, but he made his wishes clear.

"Read the parchments in your possession," the tyrant demanded.

Both Macheve and Gnafil began to read at the same time. They spoke simultaneously, neither wishing to disobey the order. Their voices became a garbled, confused mess, but it did not matter. They continued, and each poured through the notes of Ansas the sorcerer.

Reiculf absorbed every word. His twisted awareness unraveled the jumbled mass of concepts and placed them in context. He even gave the sorcerer a momentary nod of acknowledgment.

Ansas' ideas were brilliant and insightful, but ultimately, they revolved around his own delusion of godhood. The sorcerer believed he was able to transcend his role in a mortal world, and his arrogance was monumental. The vast majority of the findings would do little to enhance the powers of other creatures. Unless a spell caster could match Ansas' focus and power, the insight offered upon the parchments would not lead anyone to greater glory.

Reiculf, however, understood arrogance all too well. The daokiln embraced the attribute, viewed it as an ally to his own ambitions. It was simplicity itself for the tyrant to peel away Ansas' conceit and understand the sorcerer's findings in a fashion he could utilize for his own benefit.

Many of the concepts described by the sorcerer were already known to the daokiln, but several opened new passages of understanding. Reiculf knew his power would grow, but his influence remained locked in Demonspawn. Even the descriptions of sharing magical slices failed to open a clear path for Reiculf's ultimate aspirations.

When the serp and infern finished, Reiculf bore down upon Gnafil.

"You absorbed a portion of the sorcerer's ebony power?"

"Yes," the infern responded immediately.

"But that power was stripped from you?"

"Yes."

"That may be, but there will still be a history of that magical core within you. I will inspect it."

Gnafil did not die, but he wished he had. It felt as if his insides were being yanked through his skin. He screamed in agony, but the torment would not end quickly.

"He made you empty your core of your own magic," Reiculf stated as he inspected the infern's magical innards, "but that was not totally necessary. It was a step that was eliminated by the serps."

The daokiln dropped the infern and turned to Macheve.

"Why?" the monster demanded.

"As you said, it was unnecessary," Macheve responded. "Ansas was fixated upon the purity of magical hues. The council of serps was not so obsessed. We sought only to

utilize the magical core to bind us. The purity of the magic was inconsequential to our ambitions."

"The magical core of a different spell caster was once inside you, but that has also been removed," Reiculf stated to Macheve. "I will inspect you as well and compare the differences."

Just as Gnafil had faced the agony of examination, Macheve felt the daokiln reach viciously into her magical core. She could not stifle her screams any more than the infern, but her shrieks meant nothing to the demon tyrant.

As the daokiln inspected the magic, he began to understand certain intricacies extremely important to his own needs. He questioned his pawns to confirm his findings. He turned first to the infern.

"You received a slice of Ansas' magic, but first you purified yourself of previous spell castings. Isn't that correct?"

"Yes," Gnafil managed to answer through a wince of pain.

"You never placed any magic of your own within Ansas. That is also correct, yes?"

The question confused the infern.

"He would never have accepted my orange energy," Gnafil admitted. "The sorcerer wished to remain pure. It would have..."

"What do I care for purity?" the daokiln growled. "Answer me!"

"You are correct."

"Ansas focused on amplification, not true transference," Reiculf stated as fact. "He gave away his magic in hopes of transcending his own limitations. His theory was insightful, but flawed."

The demon lord looked to Macheve.

"Serp, you took magical slices from a wizard, but you did not empty your core. That was the proper decision, but you failed to take greater initiative. The magic connected you, but you could not utilize the energy of this wizard—this Neltus—for your own spells. Correct?"

Macheve was still struggling from the daokiln's inspection of her core. She could not yet speak, but she managed to nod.

"Your council obtained connection from the transfer, but again the magic itself was beyond your grasp. You were able to link your own powers, but you ignored a final connection, a bond that would have allowed you to employ the energy of the wizard as your own."

Reiculf released a wicked laugh as he realized how close he was to finally obtaining his ultimate wish.

"You were all fools! The answer is so apparent it is laughable. The serps failed to step far enough, and Ansas stepped in the wrong direction. Purification was unnecessary, even detrimental."

Reiculf looked down upon Gnafil with a twisted grin. He could taste the expansion of his power and influence before he even began the process.

"Tell me, infern, what do you think would have happened if Ansas ignored purity and instead focused on the true transference of magic through the cores of spell casters? What if, just as he placed a slice of his magic in you, he took one from your core and combined it within his own essence?"

The infern wasn't quite sure what to say, but he knew he should not remain silent.

"I believe he would have been able to cast spells of fire that were amplified by both orange and black energy."

Scoffing at the answer, Reiculf sneered in disgust.

"I should have expected a limited answer. You lack the awareness to see potential beyond simple hues."

The daokiln turned back to Macheve.

"And what of you serp? Are you ready to speak? Can you answer with any greater intelligence."

"The mixing of cores would have allowed for a transfer of energy," Macheve replied through several coughs. "Ansas could have cast his spells through Gnafil."

The daokiln appeared slightly more pleased with the serp's answer, but he realized that neither Macheve nor Gnafil could appreciate the magnitude of Reiculf's discovery.

"A much better response, but still not complete. You both remained focused on your own petty situations. You both speak of castings. Spells give purpose to magic, but other forces can obstruct the influence of incantations. I can cast spells of total annihilation, but only within the confines of Demonspawn. I am, or rather *was*, forever blocked from reaching out into the physical realms. What good is a powerful spell casting if it is confined by dimensional barriers?"

"I do not understand the question," Macheve admitted freely. "Your influence is felt throughout the dark realm and it reaches into other dimensions as well."

"Only because those outside of Demonspawn reach back to me. Look at you. The wizard of Connel was able to send you here because you foolishly forced your will upon dieruhnes. I could not have touched you if you did not take the first step. But this... this changes all of that!"

The serp began to understand Reiculf's musings. If she had not already lost her soul to the fiend, she would have fallen into despair. Her will, however, was gone and all she could do was profess what she saw as inevitable.

"You will merge slices of our magical cores together to bridge the obstacles that contain you in Demonspawn."

"Yes, but for now, I am only certain that it will work with those who have already accepted portions of magic from other spell casters. The choice must have already been made. That will remain a restriction, but it will not stop me. You and the infern will be my initial pawns. Through you, I will reach into other worlds... and I will begin with Uton."

Chapter 3

"You came to see me?" Ryson asked, thrilled to see the cliff behemoth but his curiosity rapidly expanding.

"In truth, I have come to retrieve you," Dzeb answered, his smile somewhat diminished by the pain of his knowledge. He did not come out of the Colad Mountains for a pleasant visit. He came to save the delver's life.

"Retrieve?" Ryson replied, not understanding Dzeb's meaning but unable to dismiss the hint of sorrow in the giant's simple expression.

"You are in danger," the cliff behemoth admitted, "and I have to take you to a safer place."

The delver's curiosity jumped in magnitude.

"Danger?"

Linda stepped up to her husband's side. She was also initially overjoyed to see Dzeb. The cliff behemoth served as both a guardian and friend to them both, but the warning brought a wave of anxiety to her heart.

"What kind of danger, Dzeb?"

They stood at the front door to Ryson and Linda's home. Dzeb declined to enter as the space within was too constricting and he worried about damaging the structure and its contents. The cliff behemoth looked about to ensure no one else had been listening. It was an impossible hope. His appearance caught the attention of hundreds, and the citizens of Burbon could not simply dismiss the arrival of such a giant. As they gawked with their own curious nature, Dzeb decided not to discuss such a sensitive topic before so many ears.

"It is best we not talk about it here."

Ryson understood, and though it pained him to wait for answers, he agreed with Dzeb's concerns. As if he was searching for a path through the dense forest, his mind raced with alternatives to solve the dilemma. He considered where they could go for both safety and privacy and an immediate solution became apparent.

"There's an armory a few blocks to the north," the delver offered. "There's plenty of room for you. We can go there. Would that work?"

"If you believe it would offer us sanctuary, then it would indeed."

Before they could turn to leave, Stomps raced across the threshold of the front door and leapt into the arms of the cliff behemoth. The dog wagged his tail furiously as he licked Dzeb's wide and smiling face.

"And who is this fine fellow?" Dzeb asked, happily stroking the dog's back with one hand as he held the animal gently in his other arm.

"This is Stomps," Ryson replied. "We got him from Enin."

"A fine dog. He fits you well," but the behemoth once again lost a bit of his warm grin. "Another reason why you must leave here. Nothing must ever endanger such a loyal friend."

"Let's get to the armory and we can talk about this." Ryson then looked to his wife. "Are you coming?"

"Of course I am," Linda responded with a bluntness that made it clear even the cliff behemoth would not be able to restrain her.

"I will carry Stomps," Dzeb replied, considering it more of an honor than a chore. "Lead us, Ryson Acumen. The sooner we get there the better. Time is not an overwhelming concern, but we should not delay. I also know you are probably very curious."

Aching to know more about the giant's sudden appearance, the delver wasted no time in guiding the cliff behemoth up the street and closer to the center of town. He ignored the growing number of residents that came out to witness the spectacle. His mind raced with wonder, and though he knew many answers would have to wait, there were certain questions he could ask freely as they walked.

"Did the guards give you any trouble at the gate?"

"They asked me to stop, but I insisted I had to speak with you."

Ryson imagined the scene and wondered if any of the guards made a foolish attempt to block the giant's path.

"Did they try to stop you?"

"They said I should wait," Dzeb revealed, "that they would bring you to me, but my path is the will of Godson, not the will of men."

"You didn't hurt anyone, did you?" Ryson wondered out loud before catching himself.

"Of course not. I simply walked past. They seemed confused by my response. They sent some men on horseback, but these humans do not completely understand such fine animals."

Ryson knew that the cavalry soldiers understood their horses quite well, but they didn't know about the strange connection between animals and cliff behemoths. The delver had seen Dzeb interact with horses on several occasions. Ryson often wondered if, on some level, the behemoth actually communicated with them. It wasn't that absurd, not with magic in the air. He knew Enin could somehow talk with dogs, and looking at Stomps contentedly cradled in the arm of the gentle giant, it wouldn't have surprised the delver if Dzeb had long conversations with all four-legged creatures.

"The horses wouldn't stand in your way, would they?"

"Horses hold far greater wisdom. They understood my need."

Ryson could picture the rest. He wondered how shocked the soldiers must have become when their horses heeded the giant's will over their own commands. He almost laughed at the thought, but then he considered why Dzeb was there and any amusement within him simply vanished.

They walked up to the front of the armory and Ryson held a quick conversation with the guards at the door. It was an odd request, to open the armory for the benefit of a strange creature, but after reviewing the number of onlookers gathering in the street, they all agreed it would be best if Dzeb was removed from the eyes of the public.

The entrance of the stout brick building was comprised of two tall wooden doors, and when opened, allowed for the easy storing and distribution of weapons of all sizes. Dzeb had no difficulty gaining entry into the building, and there was plenty of room in the center of the structure for the cliff behemoth to move about without backing into a wall or crushing a chair.

Ryson asked for privacy, and since the delver was considered a vital element of the town's defenses, the guards allowed him the courtesy. They returned to the outside of the armory to deal with the curious public. When the doors were closed, the delver could no longer curb his curiosity.

"What's going on, Dzeb?" Ryson asked, but it was his wife who demanded a specific explanation.

"You said Ryson was in danger," Linda stated. "What kind of danger?"

Dzeb continued to pet Stomps, who was almost falling asleep in the arms of the giant, but the behemoth spoke with a degree of sadness that was in direct contrast to the serenity of the gentle interaction.

"The master of demons has found a way to reach out from his pit," Dzeb replied stoically. "He will bring as much pain and suffering to Uton as he can, but he will almost certainly fix his sight upon Ryson."

"The master of demons?" the delver questioned. Ryson knew a good deal of the legends, but he could never claim a complete understanding of the intricacies of magic, dimensional boundaries, or even demons. Still, he had come across the name of the demon tyrant in some of his readings, and he wished to confirm his knowledge of the subject was accurate. "Isn't that Reiculf?"

"Yes, the daokiln. Pure evil, a creature in complete opposition to Godson. He was restricted to Demonspawn, but events have transpired to allow him to extend his reach beyond previous boundaries."

Linda had no concept of Demonspawn, or a daokiln. Almost every word carried one absurdity after another, but the thought of a demon master brought a hideous image to her mind. She tried to brush it all away as childish notions, but she could not dismiss her memories and the shadows of the past.

She had seen too much evil since the magic returned, experienced horrors that could not be forgotten. The line between fact and fiction had been blurred into nonexistence. Even the most unbelievable tales had become reality. That new reality also contained a somewhat unsettling understanding of the cliff behemoth.

Linda did not doubt the intentions of the titan. She knew Dzeb to be as kind and innocent as he was monumental in both size and faith. The cliff behemoth, however, was also guided by a force she could not completely understand. She knew the impact behind his sudden appearances. Dzeb had arrived in Bourbon and stated Ryson was in danger, and the giant had the uncanny knack to arrive just before tragedy struck.

Hoping to evade such a calamity, she searched for a way clear of any new peril, especially for her husband. She questioned why such a creature as a demon lord would set his sights on a delver, whose only fault was an overwhelming curiosity.

"But why does he want to go after Ryson?" Linda insisted.

"Because of everything Ryson has done," Dzeb answered.

"I don't think he's ever had anything to do with this demon master before." Linda noted, but then quickly questioned Ryson. "Have you?"

"Not that I know of. I've had some run-ins with a few demons, but not Reiculf."

Linda believed that was more than sufficient, and she spoke to Dzeb with even greater determination to derail any further concerns.

"Then this is all some mistake. Why would he be in danger?"

Dzeb held no desire to place fear in the soul of the delver's wife. Quite the opposite, he wished to keep her safe from all harm. He wanted nothing but happiness and contentment for the both of them, a life without struggles, but it was not his wishes that mattered.

"To Reiculf, the past is of great consequence. Your delver has accomplished great things, helped to defeat evil. He has become a warrior for righteousness, and that has gained both the attention and the wrath of the daokiln. When a creature of such malevolence can reach into physical lands, he will strike out at those he considers a threat... or even just those individuals who have been blessed by Godson. Ryson is clearly such an individual."

Linda's fear and anxiety turned to fury. It seemed that logic had no bearing on the circumstances they faced. Her mind was a swirling mix of horrific and confusing thoughts, and she could barely keep focus on what was happening around her. A surprise visit from the trusted cliff behemoth had turned into yet another nightmare for her and Ryson to face.

She made another attempt to ignore it all, to wipe the bizarre conversation from her memory. She shook her head in disgust, even turned away and looked out through one of the very few narrow and barred windows.

She could see the citizens of Burbon reluctantly leaving, but still taking quick glances back toward the armory. Their curiosity was real, as was their concern. She could see it in their faces. The people of Burbon did not take well to breaks in their routine. She knew they wished for a return to order, as did she, and her anger grew.

Turmoil had returned to Burbon, and it was centered on Ryson Acumen. She had great respect and even love for the cliff behemoth, but Dzeb became a messenger of doom. Linda had traveled that path before, and it always seemed Ryson was the intended victim for some atrocious creature bent on causing pain and destruction.

She had had enough, enough of watching her husband sacrifice himself with barely a thought for his own welfare. Suddenly she was being told that as payment for such selfishness, Ryson was being hunted by some king of demons. She lost control as she turned back to the giant.

"So this is his reward for everything he's done?!" Linda nearly shrieked. "Haven't we gone through enough of this? Hasn't he done enough?!"

"He has done more than anyone could have asked," Dzeb agreed.

"Then why is this happening?!"

"The daokiln would not seek to reward your delver for his compassion."

"And what about your Godson? What about Him? Does He care?"

"He never stops caring."

"Does He care enough to help us?"

"Of course He does," Dzeb insisted, and then pointed out what he saw as absolute proof of that knowledge. "I would not be here if He didn't."

"That's not good enough!" Linda raved. "This shouldn't even be happening. Why does this daokiln even exist?"

"Discussing that would take far more time than we have available to us."

"Because you don't have an answer!"

Ryson couldn't really argue with his wife. She was right. He himself had, on more than one occasion, felt crushed by the enormity of the calamities that seemed to strike out of no where. No matter what they did, it seemed as if misfortune followed them. He had already paid a heavy price, lost close friends while battling despicable creatures bent on causing havoc. If Dzeb's warning held true, perhaps the greatest peril of all would soon be upon them. That in itself would justify doubts in a sane and just existence.

He, however, was a delver, and above seeking justice or even simple fairness, he sought answers. Dzeb had delivered a mystery to their doorstep, and rather than initially worrying about the dangers, he *needed* more information.

"Linda, hold on. We're jumping ahead of ourselves. None of this makes sense to me. Blaming Dzeb, or Godson, doesn't answer any of this."

Linda did not wish to argue with her husband, but she could not believe, or accept, his response.

"When has it ever made sense?"

"Sometimes it does. We've seen that, but for now, we need to know more... *I* need to know more." Ryson turned to the behemoth. "Reiculf is mentioned in many legends. He's not supposed to be able to reach directly into this land. What's changed?"

"I do not know," the behemoth admitted.

"But you're sure he's able to escape Demonspawn?"

"I know he can reach out from his realm and that he will set his wrath upon Uton. That means he will eventually have to eliminate the protectors of this land. That is why you are in danger."

"That's a bit vague. Do you know what he's planning?"

"To cause harm."

"That's not much better."

"He wishes to cause harm and he views you as an enemy. Isn't that enough?"

If not for the significance of the threat, Ryson would have laughed. Dzeb had delivered something less than a mystery and something more than a puzzle. Delvers served as explorers and scouts because they lived to find answers. A maze of intricacies was their playground, and Ryson craved to understand each obscure passage.

"For me? You're not serious are you?"

"I am."

"Dzeb, think about it. You come out of no where, show up at my door, and tell me I'm in danger. The only thing you can do to explain all of this is to say that Reiculf—the master of all demons—is somehow able to reach out of Demonspawn and he wants a piece of Uton. That doesn't answer anything. It just makes things more confusing, raises more questions."

Dzeb appeared somewhat confused. He did not wish to bring anguish to the delver and his family. He had come to help them, but he believed he had said everything that they needed to know. He could not comprehend what was left to explain.

"What answer have I failed to deliver?" the giant questioned.

"Just about all of them. I don't know how Reiculf is able to get to me. I'm not sure why he wants to, and I don't know what he's going to do. Godson, I don't even know how you know all of this."

"It is Godson's will."

Ryson rubbed his forehead with his palm, trying not to groan in frustration. He did not want to insult his giant friend, did not want to bring the cliff behemoth's faith into question. He did, however, reveal why he believed such an explanation was inadequate.

"Dzeb, what did I just say? We're talking about Reiculf. I'm trying to figure out how and why he would choose to come after me. Is it Godson's will that the master of all demons wants to strike me down? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Of course not. It is Godson's will that you be protected."

"Then why is Reiculf even after me?!"

"Life is complicated."

Ryson almost threw up his hands in surrender. Dealing with the overwhelming yet simple faith of the cliff behemoth was at times difficult, but Ryson could not give up on seeking answers. He tried to narrow his questions in order to get the information he required.

"What made you leave the Colad Mountains?"

"I needed to retrieve you."

"Because I'm in danger, I got that, but what brought that knowledge to you?"

"I believe we have discussed this before," Dzeb replied, as the giant realized the delver wanted him to explain the unexplainable. "You've asked me before how I know Godson's will. He delivers it to me and I am aware. It is simple to hear the word of Godson, but not so simple to explain."

Dzeb saw the confusion etched in both Linda and Ryson's faces. He knew he was not reaching them, but then he noticed the sword on Ryson's back.

"I see you still carry the Sword of Decree," the giant declared.

"So?" Ryson responded, wondering what his enchanted blade had to do with the word of Godson.

"In your hands, the blade has become more than a weapon. Its enchantment has expanded, and it now delivers inspiration, does it not?"

"Inspiration? I'm not sure about that, but it has, at times, given direction. It doesn't change perspective, and I don't think it reveals Godson's will."

"Do not be so hasty in your judgment. Godson's will is vast and complex."

"Fine, but my point is that the sword doesn't answer every question. It doesn't reveal every secret. It doesn't tell me what to do every step of the way. There are times it leaves me completely in the dark. Sometimes I think it's almost random when it decides to give out information."

"But it has... and it will again."

"I suppose," Ryson allowed, "but what does this have to do with Reiculf?"

"You asked how I knew Godson's will. When the sword imparts knowledge upon you, does it speak to you?"

"No. It doesn't say anything."

"Does it whisper words through the wind?" Dzeb pressed.

"No, I just know. The message becomes clear in my mind."

"As does the will of Godson in *my* mind... when He commands it."

"So that's why you came here? It's like when I hold the sword and suddenly know what to do?"

"I believe that is the best explanation I can give you."

Ryson wondered if he would get anything clearer from the giant. Dozens of questions still danced through his mind, and his curiosity and desire for answers continued to burn deep within him. He did not wish to simply stifle either. He *wanted* greater understanding, especially considering the depth of Dzeb's message.

He wondered if he could simply accept that Reiculf was suddenly able to reach across the boundaries which once separated the demon master from Uton. As a delver, how could he—or any delver—just submit to the belief that he was in such danger without

proof? Would he be willing to race away without seeing or hearing anything beyond a cliff behemoths recital of faith?

He knew he could not, but in considering Dzeb's response, he believed he might have found a possible solution.

"Okay," Ryson began, "I can understand that. Enchantments and magic are difficult to explain. You got a message from Godson... like I get a message from my sword. It's difficult to describe how it happens. It just does. Maybe I need to try that now."

The delver said nothing further. He pulled the Sword of Decree from the sheath across his back and looked deep into the glowing blade.

The sword reflected natural light and it bathed the interior of the once dim armory with glorious radiance. For a brief moment, the blade appeared to pulsate, somewhat like a star twinkling in a clear night sky.

Ryson lifted the blade a bit higher, but only for a moment. He quickly returned it to its sheath. He looked first at Dzeb and then to Linda.

"He's right. I'm not sure how, but I know everything he said is true."

Linda's fear began to rise and she quickly grasped for any hope.

"Are you going to be alright? I mean is it possible to get away from... what did you call it? A daokiln?"

Ryson wondered about that himself, but he quickly came to reassuring conclusion.

"It has to be possible. And I'm not just saying that. If I didn't have a chance, why would the sword warn me? Why would Dzeb even be here?"

"He is correct," Dzeb added. "As I said before, it is Godson's will he be protected."

"And can you protect him?" Linda demanded.

"I will do whatever needs to be done."

Linda wanted more. She wanted to be certain that her husband would be safe, but before she could continue, their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of several soldiers.

Captain Klusac entered with four other guards. He stepped directly up to the cliff behemoth to get a good look at the giant. Klusac, the soldier who had taken charge of the town guard after Sy Fenden's death, was a large man compared to most, but he appeared insignificant compared to the behemoth. He did not, however, let the difference in size alter his view of authority.

He had never met Dzeb, had no idea exactly what to expect, but he couldn't allow for such disorderly behavior, not with the town still in such a fragile state. Burbon had lost its leader when goblins had swarmed through its streets. Captain Fenden's death shattered the morale of the guard and the town as a whole. They were all still recovering from that loss, and Klusac wanted to restore some aspect of stability. Giants parading through town were not helping his cause.

Klusac spoke calmly but with conviction.

"You were told to remain at the gate. You ignored that request. I can't have that."

Ryson tried to intervene.

"Captain, this is Dzeb. He's a friend."

Klusac did not take his eyes from the giant. He did not ignore the delver's words, but he made it clear they were not sufficient in defending the behemoth's actions.

"I would hope a friend of yours is also a friend of Burbon. Friends do not disregard the instructions of the town guard."

"The instructions of Godson take priority," Dzeb answered without a desire for confrontation but with certainty towards his own actions. There was no arrogance in his words, nor was there dismissal in the concerns of the captain. He spoke as if they all answered to Godson with the same level of regard.

Once more, Ryson attempted to intercede. He knew a debate over such authority would lead them to difficult ground.

"Klusac, please understand, this is an extremely unique situation. He had news for me, important news. He couldn't wait."

Ryson's tone caught the captain's attention. A soldier's intuition led Klusac to believe that the warning delivered by the giant extended beyond the welfare of the delver.

"Is the town in danger?" Klusac asked, as he immediately altered his priorities.

"No, but it looks like I am."

Ryson went on to explain everything he knew. He realized the story had holes, and he began to appreciate Dzeb's quandary in explaining the will of Godson. He had to tell the town captain that an enchanted sword confirmed the danger. He knew his story sounded absurd, but they were all living under the whims of magical energies which constantly sculpted the land, changed the rules of life and understanding.

"So you see," Ryson said upon completing his explanation, "Dzeb had to get this message to me. He was trying to help."

Klusac ignored Dzeb's intentions. The captain remained focused on the safety of the town he swore to protect.

"Hey, I like helpful rock monsters as much as anyone, but..."

"Cliff behemoth. Not a rock monster," Ryson corrected.

"Okay, a cliff behemoth, but Ryson, you and I talked about this. This town needs you, but it also needs normalcy, routine. A rock... I mean a cliff behemoth walking down the street is not normal. Now you're telling me some demon lord is after you? I know you didn't ask for this, and I'm not trying to blame you, but this is the last thing we need right now."

Ryson understood exactly what Klusac meant. The loss of Sy Fenden burned grief into the delver's heart. He knew the town had lost more than a captain of the guard; they had lost their leader, the soldier who served as both the unyielding shield and the very point of the sword that defended them. It was all the more reason to listen to both Dzeb and the enchanted blade.

"I know, but don't worry about it. We're leaving. All of us."

The delver's resolute response surprised them all, save for Dzeb. Ryson declared what was the obvious solution.

"We'll be leaving immediately. We just have to go back home to gather a few things. Everything will be back to normal for Burbon as soon as I'm gone."

Klusac appreciated the delver's concern for the town, but he also did not casually dismiss the loss of the delver's services, or Ryson's welfare.

"Do you need additional protection? I can send a detachment of soldiers to escort you."

"No, that won't be necessary."

"When it's over, will you be coming back?" the captain requested.

"I hope so."

Despite the delver's claim, it seemed as if a chasm had suddenly opened between Ryson and Burbon. The captain hoped to bridge that gap before it became too wide to overcome. To his dismay, he could not find the words to define his sentiment and the growing silence became too much to endure.

"Where are you going now?" Klusac finally asked.

Ryson revealed what the sword had shown him.

"I'm supposed to go to Connel," the delver admitted. He then looked to Dzeb. "Is that where you were going to take me?"

"I meant only to retrieve you. I acknowledge Godson, and I allow Him to ultimately direct my path. If the sword says we must go to Connel, then so we shall."

Chapter 4

When Macheve appeared in Dark Spruce Forest, there were no elf guards stationed in the nearby trees, no deer traipsing through the underbrush, not even a single goblin hiding in the thicket. There was only one elf in that otherwise deserted area of the forest, and that was exactly what she, and Reiculf, wanted.

Scheff Rutlan had purposely sought out an area where he could test a spell without endangering other elves or animals. He had informed the elf guard of his intentions and they would see to it he was not disturbed. Scheff and the other elves, however, had no idea he was being monitored from Demonspawn. The guards kept watch over the perimeter, and Scheff's mind remained focused on the aspects of a new and potentially beneficial spell.

Scheff's magical energy cascaded with a violet hue, and he held sway over the power of the storm. His concentration afforded him the ability to cast with a perfect circle, a symbol of great control over both the energy itself and the direction with which he molded it.

Despite once losing himself to selfish aspirations, the elf became more aware of external influences. He never lost his respect or his affection for the energy that coursed within him, but he did not allow it to become his sole inspiration. As he continued to experiment with his spells and sharpen his skills, he did so with a desire to find wisdom beyond shaping incantations. He shunned the arrogance that once led him astray. He hoped to find a new direction, a path that allowed the magic within him to be a guide toward greater understanding rather than an instrument for his own glory.

With such motivation, Scheff considered the properties of violet magic and how he could apply them to a healing spell which might be used with greater frequency. Healing spells could cure diseases, mend bones, and erase severe injuries, but they also slightly altered the subject receiving the treatment.

In most cases, the alteration was minor, barely traceable, and faded after a few days, but several treatments could lead to more lasting effects. These, too, would eventually disappear, but Scheff hoped to find a spell that would heal without magically altering the natural structure of living creatures, one that would not interrupt the basic principles of life.

Healing was a natural process, but it was often as slow as it was deliberate. Magic was utilized to quicken and augment that process. To succeed, he needed to find the proper connection between the element of his core magic and the process he wished to enhance.

Storms moved and developed in so many ways. Over time, they grew into tempests, tornadoes, and hurricanes, but they could also diminish into nothing more than a passing shower. They cut across both the land and the sea, moved in all directions, sometimes at the same instant.

Focusing upon rains that could turn into downpours and just as quickly fade into a light mist, Scheff shaped an ambition to utilize the same aspects into energy that would flow through an entity of any substance. A perfect circle formed around the two fingers of his right hand as he touched the leaves of a wilted plant. The magic rolled off his hand and swirled about the yellow and brown edged leaves.

Almost immediately, the discoloration disappeared, replaced by a vibrant green. The healing effect was beyond doubt, but the elf needed to confirm the stability of the process. He wanted to ensure that the magic did nothing more than relieve the malady as opposed to change the essence of the plant.

Scheff used his magical abilities to look deeper into the stems and leaves. Beyond returning to full health, the plant was not altered in any other way. Scheff had succeeded in restoring vitality without disturbing the balance of nature. It was a small step toward gaining a greater perspective for the natural progression of life, but one the elf felt was extremely important.

Despite his success, a voice from behind him mocked the elf's achievement.

"Healing plants?" Macheve asked. "What's next? Walking canes for worms?"

Scheff jumped slightly and twisted about to face the distraction. He scanned the forest but saw only one intruder. The elf disregarded the insult, offered no explanation or defense for the purpose of his spell, but rather immediately focused on the serp's presence.

"And what is a serp doing in Dark Spruce Forest? Hoping to recruit a few goblin minions?"

"I am well beyond the need for minions," Macheve responded, "but I am here for recruitment purposes."

"Beyond myself and the trees, this area is clear. Are you hoping to place an oak under your powers of persuasion?"

"No, I am here for you."

The threat was beyond preposterous. Scheff did not fear the influence of any serp. He did not even have to cast a defensive spell. The powerful magic that surged within him would serve as a natural and impenetrable shield.

"Leave now, serp, before you get hurt," the elf warned.

"I am well aware of your powers, Scheff Rutlan. You cast in a perfect circle of violet magic, you have a strong will, and your reserves of energy are vast."

"Then you know that even a most extraordinary serp could never break through my defenses."

"That is true, but I am also aware that you once accepted the core slice of a powerful sorcerer. You embedded the magic of another into your own essence—by your own choice—and that will lead to your downfall."

Scheff found the accusation painful, and he was not pleased the serp threw his mistakes out with such irreverence, but he would not hide from his past errors.

"A mistake I do not deny, but one I will not make again. Was that your plan? Did you think you could entice me somehow to join you?" Scheff shook his head as an answer to his own question and as a sign of disgust with his own past. "If you think you can seduce me with promises of new powers and abilities, you are quite wrong. I will not walk that path again."

"What you think is a path before you is nothing compared to the consequences of your previous decisions. Your choice has already been made. You will walk where you are directed."

"Directed? You make it sound as if you can force me. You just admitted you lack the strength to influence me."

"Indeed *I* do, but I am not here to place you under *my* control."

Scheff assumed he understood the threat, but found it both inadequate and pathetic. The elf believed Macheve must have been referring to a coordinated effort between herself and other serps.

Such a council had recently caused more than just turmoil in Dark Spruce. They had incited anger and resentment between the races, had hoped to cause a war and almost succeeded. Their influence had been a testament to their combined talents and their twisted desires. Still, Scheff knew that he could fight off even the collective influence of several serps.

"I have heard of a serp council," the elf stated. "Several serps managed to join their talents by the same method in which Ansas placed his ebony magic within me. I was told the council had been defeated, but it appears another has managed to take its place. If that is the case..."

"No," Macheve corrected, "not a council of serps. I am connected to only one other, but his power is nearly unlimited. Where even a council of serps would have difficulty manipulating one such as you, the one I serve can do so with ease."

Scheff believed the serp was only bluffing. His own magic served as a powerful barrier. If there were several serps before him joined in magic, he might have felt the slight biting edge of concern. Macheve, however, was alone, and Scheff remained confident that any connection to other forces could be overcome by his own superior talents.

"Then try it, and let us be done with this game."

Macheve smiled maliciously. Had it been up to her, she would have done exactly as Scheff requested. She would have unleashed the full power at her disposal and taken over the elf's mind with absolute authority. She would make him crawl across the forest floor with his elf nose in the dirt.

It was not, however, Macheve's decision to make. She was more than joined to the demon master through magic. Her individual resolve had been pressed aside and replaced by the twisted ambitions of Reiculf.

The demon tyrant placed not only his magic within the serp, but also his consciousness. He had given a miniscule portion of his evil core to the serp and took part of Macheve's magical essence to complete the unbreakable bond. Because the energy was shared in such a manner, the magic of both beings had become intertwined in a way that could transcend dimensional barriers. In essence, the serp became more than just a pawn of the daokiln; Macheve was an extension of Reiculf's corrupt thoughts.

With Reiculf's twisted and hateful spirit participating in the confrontation with the elf, the demon decided to play with his prey, though he did so through the serp's body.

"I have a better idea," Macheve responded with a wicked grin. "Why don't we have a test of spells?"

Scheff saw the contest as pointless. He had nothing to prove.

"I have no time for such trivial games."

"Do you believe my magic is trivial?" Macheve taunted.

"Serps are notorious for weak spells," Scheff declared. "Even if you have developed some skill, I doubt you would be anything more than a minor challenge. What do I have to gain from such inconsequential exploits?"

"Gain? You seek to make a wager?"

"No, I seek nothing from you. I issue this last warning. These woods are the domain of the elves. There are no goblins here for you, nor river rogues or shags. Leave before I decide to bring you before the elf captain. He will not be so lenient to a serp who trespasses in Dark Spruce."

The serp did not respond with words. Macheve simply stepped over to the plant Scheff had healed and touched it with her finger. It withered and died instantly.

The suddenness of death surprised the elf, but only briefly. The plant was small and the serp could have focused all her magical power to create such an effect.

"Is that supposed..." the elf began, but the serp interrupted him before he could finish.

Once more Macheve responded with deeds over words. Remaining quiet, she moved to a sapling, much larger than the initial plant, but nowhere near the height or bulk of a mature tree. She grasped the thin stem that had hoped to one day become a thick and sturdy trunk. It would never have the chance. The entire sapling withered into a dark brown and lifeless mass in but the wink of an eye.

Scheff's surprise grew. Killing plants was not a great magical deed, but the extreme suddenness of death revealed a deeper power, one that should have been beyond the magic of a serp. Life—even that of a small plant or sapling—should have resisted, should have been able to at least fight against the ultimate transformation. To the elf's eyes, there was no struggle at all.

He wondered if it was all some kind of an illusion. He reached out and pulled the spindly stalk from the hand of the serp. He allowed pure violet magic to wash over the dead stem, energy that would clear any remnants of an illusion, but to no avail. He even focused the spell of healing he had just perfected on the remains of the sapling, but that, too, failed. The serp's magic was stronger than he anticipated.

"You should have known better than to waste your magic," Macheve finally replied. "Your particular casting was meant to heal, not reverse death. That was the whole purpose of your spell, was it not... to create healing energy that would not transform the recipient? Altering the state of an object from death back to life is in direct contrast to the intent of the casting you devised."

Unlike the spells which withered the plants, Macheve's revelations failed to surprise the elf. Scheff was well aware of the serp's ability to read the subtle intricacies of even hidden thoughts.

"Reaching into my mind for the mechanics of my magic?" Scheff accused.

"Still pretending you are dealing with an ordinary serp?" Macheve responded. "You obviously need a larger display."

Macheve raised her arms out to her sides and pointed her hands in opposite directions. Three rings of energy swirled around her midsection, but they lacked any particular color. They were near transparent, but they could not be dismissed. They would have been invisible had their borders not twisted the edges of space into a blurred state of existence. While they were perfect in both roundness and conformity, they seemed to betray a warped control over the energy itself.

Before the serp even released her spell, the significance of the three rings and their lack of color shocked the elf. Elflore described only one creature capable of casting with such skill and power.

Reiculf!

The name burst into Scheff's mind, affording answers to the mysteries he witnessed. While an ordinary serp could not hope to overwhelm life with magic, the daokiln held the power to annihilate all living things.

Sensing the elf's fear, Macheve laughed and expressed her own satisfaction.

"So I am a poor challenge for you. Isn't that what you professed?"

"How is this possible?" Scheff muttered in near disbelief.

"You should know. You helped achieve this end... and you will help me again."

Rather than explain further, Macheve unleashed her spell. The entire area of woods surrounding the elf died instantly. There was no struggle, no slow progression, just the immediate destruction of life. Bushes and small plants collapsed to the ground. Ivy that had once worked vigorously to wrap around tree trunks and climb toward the sun fell to the forest floor in masses of limp yellow strands. Every leaf withered up into small brown clusters and then crumbled into dust. Several branches fell to the ground in a cascade of brittle destruction, and even sturdy tree trunks succumbed to rot and decay.

"Do you still believe your magic is more powerful than mine?" Macheve cackled, but it was not the serp who acted. It was Reiculf who had ripped life from the forest and found such pleasure in the display.

Scheff froze, partially in fear, but mostly in uncertainty. He faced the ultimate evil, a malice that was not supposed to exist beyond the boundaries of Demonspawn. It was as if the very bowels of the dark realm had been unlocked and poured onto the ground before him.

"Still hoping to understand it all?" Macheve asked. "The answer is within you, just as it was once within me."

"This is not a part of me!" Scheff disputed.

"But it is. You willingly accepted Ansa's magic. You opened a conduit to your core. Even though the sorcerer's magic no longer resides within you, the channel still exists. That is your past, a choice you can not deny. Reiculf can reach through such a conduit, mix his essence with yours. You will become a part of him and he will become a part of you... but control will be his."

"No! We are not in Demonspawn. His power is limited to that dimension."

"Come now. You just saw what I did. Do you think I could do that on my own... a lowly serp? I have walked upon the desolate grounds of Demonspawn. I have met... and joined with the daokiln. Now, he can reach other realms through me, thus I came for you."

Scheff saw the ecstatic expectation in Macheve's eyes. He knew the serp was preparing to take over his mind. She could not do so with her own influence, but she had access to the greatest of all evils. If a passage to his core did exist, he was more than just vulnerable, he was in grave danger. Grasping at one last hope, the elf professed his own belief regarding the daokiln.

"I do not accept his presence!"

Macheve cackled again.

"You do not have to. To a degree, the rules have changed. He does not have to wait for you to come to him. He can take you on his own."

"Not if I refuse him!"

"Normally, that might be true, but you continue to forget your past. You accepted the sorcerer's magic. It was *you* that made that decision, not Reiculf. No one forced it upon you, and now you have to face the consequences. You can't deny what you've done."

"I make no attempt to deny it, but I have grown, and I will not make the same mistake again."

"Irrelevant."

As if to prove the declaration, Reiculf unleashed his dreadful magic. He reached out through Macheve, used her manipulative talents and expanded them to an unimaginable level. With his own energy reaching out like a thousand tentacles, Reiculf took hold of the pathway that still existed to the center of Scheff's essence.

The daokiln sliced off a portion of the elf's core and replaced it with his own diseased magic. Pulling Scheff's essence through Macheve, Reiculf consumed it back in Demonspawn, thus mingling the elf's energy with his own... both in his body and Scheff's. The connection was complete. The elf spell caster was in the grip of the demon master.

A Final Note from the Author

Spirit Past does not end here. The entire book is available for sale at many on-line ebook stores. For more information on obtaining the rest of the story, please visit www.sitelane.com.

If you have a comment or question about any of the *Delver Magic* books, please feel free to send me a note. Also, please let me know if you encounter any difficulty with the formatting. Contact information can be found on my web site at www.sitelane.com. Please consider my other novels, including *Soul View*, *Soul Chase*, *Counterproductive Man*, *When Do I See God?* and *Alien Cradle*.

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